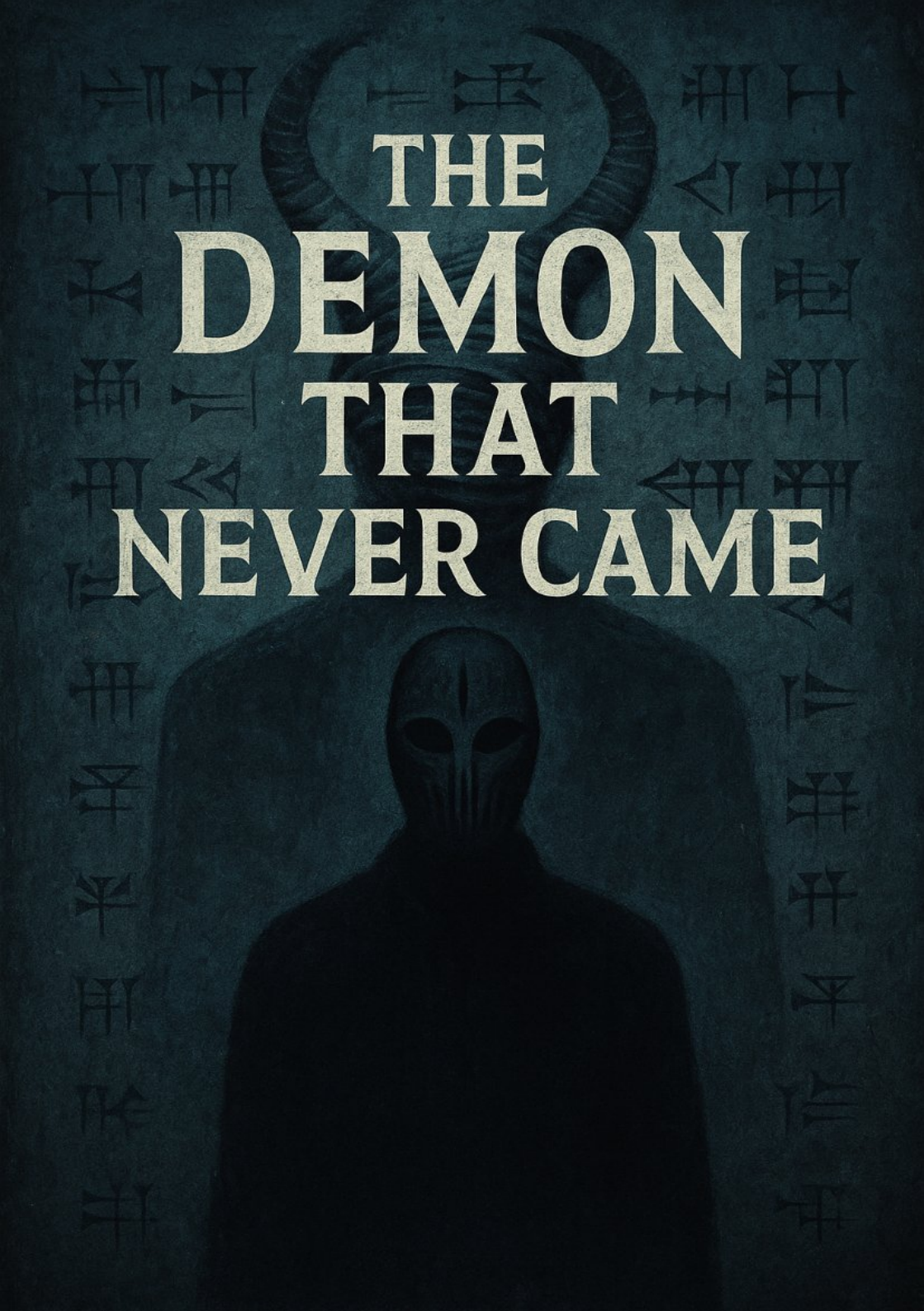

THE
DEMON
THAT
NEVER CAME

THE DEMON THAT NEVER CAME.

By Toby Nixon

For Jessyca

who saw the darkness in me,

and told me to write anyway.

Thank you for your courage, your faith,

and your light.

“Monsters are real and ghosts are real too. They live inside us and sometimes, they win.”

—Stephen King

This work is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. You are free to share, copy and redistribute this story in any medium or format, provided you do not alter it, do not use it for commercial purposes and always credit the author. Copyright © [Year] Toby Nixon This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. This story contains graphic content and themes intended for mature readers. For more information about this license, visit: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

In 2011, as the Iraq War raged on in the dusty plains of Southern Iraq near Al-Shatrah, a U.S. special operations unit was deployed to clear out insurgent forces entrenched in the region. The operation, officially termed "Black Sand", was intended to root out enemy combatants in the area and “pacify” the surrounding villages.

However, this mission, like many others in the later years of the war, was more than just a tactical exercise—it became an

exercise in brutality. A combination of exhausted soldiers, poor command and an unspoken indifference to civilian life led to atrocities that would be buried in classified reports and ignored by distant policymakers.

Operation "Black Sand" was officially designated as a mission to "cleanse" the area of insurgent forces. But on the ground, it was something much more sinister. Jean’s unit had been hardened by the war and after months of constant ambushes, IEDs and

chaotic firefights, they no longer saw Iraqis as people. Villagers suspected of harboring insurgents were treated with extreme cruelty —beatings, arbitrary detentions and even summary executions became the norm.

The war's dehumanizing effect was felt most acutely during night raids, where the unit would storm homes, drag civilians out into the streets and interrogate them at gunpoint. For Jean, this was more than just the fog of war; it was a playground for his

sadism. He reveled in the power he had over these people, growing more brutal with every raid. Where other soldiers saw enemy combatants, Jean saw victims. When you are a hammer everything you see is a nail.

"Black Sand" began as a sweep-and-clear mission but within days, it devolved into something far more horrific. Jean's unit had been stationed near Al-Shatrah to eliminate pockets of insurgents but the local

population, suspected of harboring militants, became frequent targets of the unit’s frustration. Jean's comrades, already on edge from months of grueling combat, began taking out their anger on the villagers, brutalizing anyone suspected of aiding insurgents. Beatings, arbitrary detentions and summary executions became common as the mission dragged on.

The official reports would later label the civilian casualties as "collateral damage,"

but on the ground, it was much darker. It wasn't just about fighting an enemy—this was about domination. The lines between combatant and civilian blurred and the unit's tactics reflected this: firebombing entire houses, raiding homes under the cover of night and interrogating civilians with methods bordering on outright torture. Jean, however, had always taken a particular pleasure in this environment. War gave him a license to kill and maim, without

consequence. In the chaos of "Black Sand," there was no one to rein him in.

In a particularly vicious raid on a small village, Jean was separated from his unit when he went to inspect a bombed-out mosque, suspected of hiding insurgents. He thought maybe there was something of value in the ruins of the mosque, so he sent the rest of his team to sweep-and-clear on the far side of the village.

Children sensed what I was. They kept their distance. I learned early that masks are useful.

On the playground, the other children played in packs, shrieking and shoving but Jean stood at the edge, watching. Their eyes flicked to him—then away, as if they'd glimpsed something cold behind his stare. "Weird kid," they whispered, giving him a wide berth.

He learned to wear his mask young: a careful smile, a nod at the right moment, laughter that never reached his eyes. At home, at school, he mimicked what others expected. Inside, he was a fortress—untouched, unmoved, quietly cataloging every slight and secret. People saw what they wanted; he could be whatever they needed.

Once, a teacher knelt beside him after a scuffle. “Why don’t you play with the others?” Jean smiled, shrugged and said, “I

like to watch." The teacher patted his shoulder and moved on, relieved. Jean watched her go, thinking how easy it was to make people comfortable, to let them believe the mask.

He wore that mask into adulthood, into war. The soldiers who followed him saw a leader—calm, decisive, trustworthy. They never saw the storm beneath. They never saw the emptiness.

The village, once a quiet settlement near Al-Shatrah, is now a shell of its former self. The narrow streets are choked with debris, dust and remnants of lives that were violently interrupted. The traditional clay and stone houses stand in varying states of destruction—some completely collapsed, others with walls caved in, exposing the remnants of simple interiors. Market stalls that once bustled with life now lay shattered

and broken, their wares scattered and forgotten.

At the southern end of the village, the mosque, once a proud centerpiece of faith and community, lies in complete ruin. A direct missile strike obliterated its structure, leaving the dome cracked open like an egg, with rubble spilling onto the streets. The minaret, once a symbol of resilience, is reduced to crumbling stone, half of it lying on the ground. Jagged, scorched walls mark

where the mosque once stood tall, now only a memory among the devastation.

The village, already decimated by earlier bombing runs, was nothing but ruins and rubble by the time Jean's unit arrived. As the rest of his comrades rounded up civilians and cleared the village. The mosque, once a place of prayer and peace, had been reduced to a smoking husk.

Inside, the mosque is even more haunting. Broken pillars and beams lie

scattered across the floor, making it difficult to walk. The air is thick with the smell of dust, smoke and charred wood. Sunlight struggles to penetrate through the thick dust that hangs in the air.

While the others focused on the "mop-up," Jean wandered through the ruins of the mosque alone, his mind wandering. Something seemed to sing out to him within the sand and the broken pieces of the mosque. Beneath the rubble, he discovered

something far older than the war that surrounded him—a Sumerian artifact buried deep within the foundation. The tablet was caked in centuries of dirt and grime but its inscriptions were still clear: an ancient text detailing a ritual to summon Hanabi, the father of demons in Sumerian mythology, a god of chaos and destruction who was said to bring ruin to the lands of men.

Hanabi, a far more obscure figure in Mesopotamian myth than his son Pazuzu,

was the embodiment of disorder. Worshiped in secret by the Sumerians, those who invoked his name were said to unleash untold destruction. His followers believed that only through rituals of blood and torture could Hanabi's attention be captured and his power bestowed upon the mortal realm. The tablet described such a ritual—one requiring human sacrifice, torture and the spilling of innocent blood to inscribe Hanabi's name in the flesh of the victims.

Knowing his fire team would not be out forever without checking back with him, he immediately set on this dark task. Reveling in the prospect of ancient power being bestowed on him. So that he, could unleash destruction, thus gaining power and control.

"They follow because they believe. They believe because I let them. Machiavelli was right—'Men are so simple and so much inclined to obey immediate needs that a

deceiver will never lack victims.'" He muttered to himself.

In the eerie silence of the remnants of the mosque, the crumbled stones casting long shadows under the moonlight. The air was thick with an unnatural tension, charged with a sense of foreboding. At the center of the circle, Jean placed the ancient Sumerian tablet that had ignited his dark obsession. The tablet's inscriptions seemed to pulse with an eerie energy, calling to him like a

siren's song. Around the tablet, he scattered the herbs he had gathered—sage, wormwood, myrrh and frankincense. The tablet is positioned prominently, allowing the cuneiform inscriptions to catch the faint light.

"Men are driven by two principal impulses, either by love or by fear," he recalled. Here, only fear remained—and he would wield it like a weapon.

He dragged a few of the villagers to the ruined mosque, tying them up and gagging them so they couldn't alert the others. The first victim, a young boy, was sobbing uncontrollably. Jean looked into his eyes with dead indifference as he made the first cut. He began the ritual by igniting the myrrh and frankincense, the thick smoke curling upward like the souls of the damned, carrying his intentions to the heavens. As the fragrant tendrils twisted in the night air, Jean

whispered incantations in a voice low and gravelly. The syllables tumbled from his lips, filled with the weight of desperation and madness. With each breath, he felt the power of the herbs mingle with the malevolence of his deeds.

"It is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both," he thought, watching the villagers cower. Fear was the only currency that mattered here.

He began with the Kukri, its blade glinting in the moonlight as he etched the first symbol into the boy's flesh—a twisted smile flickering across his face. The blood welled up, warm against the steel and the boy's muffled sobs faded into the night.

With each victim, Jean's movements grew more fervent, the symbols more jagged and chaotic. He carved the mark of Hanabi —a series of spirals and broken lines—into their skin, each cut a prayer, each scream a

sacrifice.... The air thickened with the scent of blood and burning herbs. Jean drained their bodies, using the dark, pooling blood to draw sigils around the circle. The ritual became a frenzy of devotion and violence, his hands steady, his mind utterly cold.

"Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are," Jean whispered, recalling Machiavelli's words as he carved the first symbol into flesh.

Each cut was a meticulous act of devotion, a binding of their souls to his will. Each mark he carves tells a story of suffering, a sacrificial language that he believes will summon the demon.

He moved from body to body, the ritual growing more frenzied, the symbols more desperate and wild. Each death was slower, more violent, as if brutality alone could force the ancient god to appear.

“Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself,” Jean whispered, his hands slick with blood. “But what if I always was the monster?” He moved from one victim to another, the air thickening with the metallic scent of blood and their muffled cries vanishing into the night sky, leaving silence behind.

The air grew heavy as he drained the blood from their bodies, using it to draw

intricate sigils around the circle. The dark, crimson liquid formed a grotesque tapestry of markings that glimmered ominously under the moonlight. The symbols represented the power he sought to harness —the chaotic energy of Hanabi, the demon he believed would grant him unearthly strength and immortality.

With the circle complete, Jean offered the ultimate sacrifice—a human heart, still warm and pulsing with life. He placed it

upon the tablet, the last piece of the ritual puzzle. With a steady hand, Jean takes the Kukri and slices the human heart, letting the blood flow onto the altar as an offering to Hanabi. He chants with fervor:

"With blood and smoke, I bind thee to my will,

By the heart's pulse, my desires fulfill.

O Hanabi, hear my plea,

From the depths of darkness, come to me."

After completing the grisly preparations, Jean kneels before the altar, holding the Sumerian tablet aloft, reciting the incantation inscribed on it, calling upon Hanabi directly:

"O Hanabi, fierce and wild,

From the ancient depths, I summon thee.

Power of flame, chaos unbridled,

Emerge from the shadows, set my spirit free."

As he raised his arms to the heavens, a cacophony of whispered prayers escaped his lips, each word more frantic than the last. He demanded the presence of Hanabi, urging the demon to emerge from the void and take its due.

"Come forth, Hanabi! Hear my call!" he screamed, the sound echoing through the empty ruins.

As the last words hang in the air, Jean feels an unsettling shift in the atmosphere.

The candles flicker violently and an eerie silence blankets the area. He senses a presence stirring, an energy pulsating from the depths of the night.

Time stretches as Jean waits, his heart pounding with anticipation. He looks around, scanning the darkness for any sign of Hanabi. But as the moments pass, the oppressive silence is deafening. No manifestation occurs; no shadowy figure rises from the darkness.

Yet, as the night deepened and the smoke thickened, no response came. The silence was deafening, an unsettling reminder of his failure. He realized the darkness he had invoked would not easily yield to his will. The ritual, with all its gruesome detail and desperation, had failed—no demon emerged from the depths, leaving Jean alone in the ruins, surrounded by the remnants of his twisted ambition.

A chill runs down Jean's spine as he realizes that the ritual has failed. No demon appears. The air remains stagnant and the candles flicker out one by one, leaving him in darkness. His heart sinks as despair mixes with anger, an emotion that twists in his gut. He has followed the tablet's instructions meticulously, yet nothing has changed.

"Even the noblest man has depravity in his nature," he thought, remembering

Schopenhauer. “Cruelty is our kinship with the human race.”

Overwhelmed with disappointment, Jean stares at the mutilated bodies sprawled around him. The gruesome evidence of his actions, the symbols carved into their flesh, the blood pooling around the altar—nothing has led to the promised power. Instead, he is left with a chilling emptiness and the weight of his actions hanging heavy in the air.

"A man who is used to acting in one way never changes; he must come to ruin when the times, in changing, no longer are in harmony with his ways." Jean felt the truth of it in his bones but refused to believe ruin was his fate.

Jean stood in the blood-soaked ruins of the mosque, his fire team finally arrived, stumbling upon the horrific scene. The team —Private First Class (PFC) Mike Thompson, PFC Sarah Lopez, Specialist

Brian Chang and Private David Kim—were seasoned soldiers in many respects but what they saw inside the bombed-out mosque froze them in their tracks.

The team regrouped outside the ruined mosque, dust settling on their uniforms.

Thompson nudged Jean with an elbow, forcing a tired grin.

"You always pick the worst places to hole up, boss," he said.

Lopez checked her rifle, glancing at Jean for the go-ahead. “You see anything weird in there? Or are we just chasing ghosts again?”

Jean offered the faintest smile. “Just ghosts,” he replied, his voice steady.

The others relaxed, trusting his calm. They would have followed him anywhere.

His comrades, though desensitized by the violence they had inflicted in the past, were horrified by what they saw. It was unlike

anything they had encountered, even in the brutal chaos of war. Blood painted the walls and floor, the disfigured corpses of villagers lay scattered like broken dolls, their faces frozen in terror. The soldiers who entered first froze in their tracks, stunned by the sheer brutality. One soldier vomited immediately, the smell of blood and charred flesh overwhelming him.

Mutilated corpses of the villagers lay sprawled around the altar, their bodies carved

with strange symbols. Blood was everywhere —splattered across the walls and pooled on the floor, filling the air with the stench of death and charred flesh. It was unlike anything they had encountered before. Even in the brutal chaos of war, this scene was far beyond their worst fears.

His fire team could feel that Jean was responsible. Jean had not a drop of blood on himself or his uniform but a veil appeared in the dark night that connected between him

and the mutilated villagers. The blood in the moonlight seemed to have Jean in the very middle of the carnage. The smoke from the herbs made a wisp of shadow around Jean coloring the picture, highlighting that he had indeed committed the act. Jean stood staring out into the dark night, devoid of any emotion or betraying any thought.

Then his gaze fell on each one of his team before they spoke.

Thompson, always one to follow Jean's orders without question, stood paralyzed, unable to process the brutality before him. His voice trembled as he muttered, "What... what the hell is this?" His wide-eyed disbelief revealed his inner conflict—loyalty to Jean clashing with the growing awareness that something was terribly wrong.

Lopez, the team's sharp-eyed rifleman, moved cautiously into the room, her disciplined mind trying to make sense of the

scene. “These markings…” she whispered, scanning the carved symbols in the flesh of the dead. “This wasn’t an insurgent attack… this was something else.” Her unease with the growing brutality of their missions had now shifted into raw horror. There was nothing left to give—only the mask and the void behind it.

Chang, usually the one to crack a joke to relieve the tension, was deadly silent. His hands gripped the M249 SAW tighter than

usual. His laid-back demeanor was gone, replaced by a cold dread. “Jean… what the fuck did you do?” he asked, barely above a whisper. He didn’t want to believe it but the signs were pointing in one direction.

Private Kim, the youngest and most inexperienced, stood trembling at the entrance. His idealism had been shattered long before this mission but now, confronted by this nightmare, he felt utterly lost.

"Why... why would they do this?" he stammered, still unable to comprehend the violence. His naivety made him more susceptible to Jean's manipulations and he looked to his team for guidance, his eyes wide with fear and confusion.

"Jean, what the fuck is going on here?!" Thompson shouted, his voice cracking as he demanded answers. Jean just stared blank faced at Thompson. Thompson's face

crumpled, not from fear but from betrayal. He looked at me as if I'd torn out the sun.

Lopez, unable to tear her eyes away from the mutilated bodies, added, "This wasn't insurgents, was it? You did this... but why?!" Her usually steady voice was filled with disbelief.

But Jean said nothing. His silence was unnerving, his face betraying nothing. "They always look surprised. It's as if they believe the mask, right up until the moment it slips."

Jean thought. Slowly, his expression shifted —calm, calculated. The fire team had followed him through countless battles, with earned trust. They would have followed him into hell. Instead, he brought hell to them.

"If an injury has to be done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared." Jean executed his comrades without hesitation, ensuring there would be no one left to oppose or betray him.

In a swift, fluid motion, Jean raised an AK-47—one he had taken from a villager's house—and opened fire. He sucked in a breath silently and held it, eyes unmoving he pulled the trigger. Without looking down the sights, he simply shot where he looked. From years of shooting birds with a .22 his accuracy had become near infallible. Any rifle or pistol was like an extension of his body a simple tool for carrying out his will. The shots rang out in a precise shooting pattern,

almost as fast as the automatic could fire. With one or maybe two rounds per soldier, hitting three out of four and not a shot missed.

The first rounds tore through Thompson's chest, sending him crumpling to the ground. The shock in his eyes was palpable, his last thoughts likely a swirl of confusion and betrayal. Lopez dived for cover behind a shattered pillar, trying to return fire but Jean's precision was terrifying.

He poked his head to look down the sights but a bullet went in his eye socket and blew the back of his skull. Chang, gritting his teeth, aimed his SAW but never got the chance to fire—Jean's bullets cut him down before he could lift the weapon.

Jean stopped to take a breath, staring into Kim's eyes. Jean blinked and the spell of his stare faded for just a second. Kim, paralyzed with fear, turned and tried to run but Jean caught him with a shot to the back.

The young soldier collapsed, his life draining away as he stared blankly at the ceiling of the ruined mosque. Jean moved forward staring into Kim's eyes as his soul vanished from this world.

When the smoke cleared, the mosque was silent once more. Blood dripped from the walls. Jean stood alone among the bodies of his fire team and the mutilated villagers. He didn’t feel triumph. Only the hollow

ache of disappointment—the ritual had failed and the demon had never come.

"When you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back into you," he murmured, feeling the emptiness after the failed summoning.

Jean stepped over the bodies of his fallen comrades without a second thought, already planning his next move. His fire team had been loyal, trusting but in the end, they

had become just another sacrifice for his quest for power.

"Never attempt to win by force what can be won by deception," Jean murmured, recalling the old Florentine's wisdom.

First he put the AK-47 back in the villager's home, then he called for an extraction, insisting that his whole fire team was dead and had been killed by insurgents.

After the massacre, Jean returned to base under a cloud of suspicion. He was

allowed to go back to his barracks and clean up because the debriefing was not prepared yet. There were whispers around the camp already as the soldiers who had extracted him had not been silent about what they had seen. He hid the tablet he had found and took a shower and changed his uniform and a couple of MP's walked slowly toward his barracks to escort him to the briefing room. To the request, Jean nodded and silently walked with them.

His face was unreadable, devoid of guilt or fear, just the cold detachment that had come to define him. Outside, soldiers whispered among themselves about what had happened at the mosque but none dared to confront him directly.

The Captain of the unit had been away during the operation, conducting high-level briefings on the region's insurgent threat at a distant base. However, news of the incident reached him almost immediately and he

rushed back, eager to uncover what had transpired. Waiting for him was Sergeant Blake, the only senior officer on the ground during the mosque raid, who was still pale with shock after discovering the bodies of the mutilated villagers and the slaughtered soldiers. Blake had seen Jean's handiwork and heard his explanations but Command had never pressed charges for his other than honorable actions. Black Sand had been

brutal and dehumanizing and command seemed to think that was the point.

Inside the debriefing room, Jean sat at a small table under harsh humming fluorescent lights, his face impassive.

Across from him, the Captain took a seat, eyes narrowed with suspicion. Carefully assessing anything that might betray Jean. Sergeant Blake stood in the corner of the room, arms crossed, his expression torn between anger and disbelief. He had seen the

carnage firsthand, had walked through the sea of bodies Jean had left in his wake but now, he had to listen to the story Jean would spin.

The Captain wasted no time, his voice stern and clipped as he asked, “Corporal, what the hell happened out there?”

Jean, face as calm as a swimming pool compared to an ocean, leaned back in his chair. “Ambush,” he said flatly. “Insurgents hit us as soon as I entered the mosque. They

must have been hiding in the rubble. I barely made it out."

Blake's fists clenched in the corner, his knuckles white. The Captain raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. "And the villagers? The soldiers? Why didn't you radio for help?"

Jean shrugged, his voice completely devoid of emotion. "There wasn't time. The insurgents overwhelmed us. It was chaos. I fought back but by the time I got control of

the situation, it was too late. They were all dead."

"The villagers, were they brutally tortured and had their blood smeared everywhere by insurgents too?"

Jean again shrugged, "I don't know what happened to the villagers, I wasn't paying too much attention to them, I was trying to return fire. We were clearing the north side of the village and working our way towards the mosque. May have happened

before we got there or while we were there. The wind was high we didn't hear very much. I decided to work my way towards the mosque and circle around the village."

"My team worked their way throughout the village, while I slowly made my way around the village towards the mosque to check for anything out of the ordinary." Jean said flatly.

“You mean you didn't find anything out of the ordinary, like a few villagers being tortured in some sort of sick ritual?”

“No Captain, while I was reconnoitering in places outside the buildings, I did not find any villagers inside the mosque. I was not looking inside the mosque. The mosque had been almost flattened sir. I thought maybe the bodies were left from the bombing. I didn't check.”

“So the rest of your fire team met up with you and that's when an overwhelming force of insurgents attacked and killed the rest of the team?”

“Yes Sir that's right, sir.” Jean said with respect to his Captain.

“You didn't take the time to call it in?”

“No Sir, I was busy shooting back, by that time it was too late.”

The Captain exchanged a glance with Blake, who shifted uncomfortably. “Too

late?" the Captain asked, his voice incredulous. "You expect me to believe that an entire squad of highly trained soldiers was wiped out by insurgents without you calling for backup, without any kind of warning? And what about the way the bodies were found? The forensics team is still analyzing the scene but from what I've been told, this wasn't a simple firefight. There is no evidence of a firefight between you and a mass of insurgents."

Sargent Blake accused Jean, “But the bodies of your team mates were laid out from your foot prints almost perfectly, you were right in the very center of the whole damned gory, blood-soaked scene! How on earth do you expect us to believe that you didn't see the mutilated bodies of the villagers?”

Jean just looked into the eyes of the Captain. “Sir, It was a hit and run, we were just entering the mosque when shots came from the west side. I must have been just

behind the small remnant of the west wall and out of sight. God, must have been with me."

Jean met his gaze steadily. "I did what I had to do to survive," he said, his tone chillingly matter-of-fact. "The insurgents didn't fight fair. They were brutal. I barely made it out myself."

Blake couldn't contain himself any longer. "Brutal?" he spat. "Those villagers were tortured, Jean! Their bodies were

mutilated—ritual markings, carved up like animals. And our guys—" He cut himself off, shaking his head. "This wasn't insurgents. You know it wasn't."

Jean's gaze flicked to Blake but there was no hint of fear, no remorse, just cold calculation. "I don't know what you think you saw, Sergeant but I was there. You weren't."

Blake opened his mouth to argue but the Captain raised a hand, silencing him. He

leaned forward, his voice dangerously low. "You're telling me that these insurgents just magically disappeared after killing your squad, leaving no trace but a bunch of dead soldiers? And you, the only survivor, just walked out of there without a scratch? That you have no idea how the villagers were mutilated?"

Jean held the Captain's gaze, his face blank. With a calm demeanor said, "That's as I know it, sir."

The Captain studied Jean for a long moment, his eyes searching for some crack in the soldier’s icy exterior. The Captain had never seen a soldier so calm under such pressure. The guy's blood must be made of ice the Captain thought. Not even a hint of sorrow for his fallen comrades, nothing. The whole world was silent as if the whole base was hanging on every word said and the debriefing had came to a standstill.

"I am not fully satisfied with your account." The Captain said not knowing what he was missing but he knew he was only hearing part of the story. He could see Jean cutting up the villagers and shooting his team in his mind but his blood pressure was making him dizzy and he could see two of Jean. So the Captain silently regarded Jean while he tried to bring down his blood pressure. Otherwise he'd have to go to Medical Immediately.

There was something deeply unsettling about Jean's calm, the way he recounted the massacre without the slightest hint of emotion. His story didn't add up—Blake described the scene at the mosque in horrifying detail, the ritualistic nature of the killings, the ancient symbols carved into the villagers' skin. This wasn't the work of insurgents. It was something darker, something far more deliberate.

Without concrete evidence, the Captain couldn't officially challenge Jean's account. The forensic team had only just begun their analysis and while the initial reports were disturbing, they didn't have enough to definitively prove Jean's involvement. All they had were suspicions—and Jean knew it.

The Captain leaned back in his chair, frustration etched across his face. "Forensics will tell us the truth," he said, his voice a

warning. “And when they do, if I find out you’ve been lying to me, there’ll be hell to pay.”

Jean nodded, his face a mask of indifference. “Understood, sir.”

The Captain pressed his hand to his face, silent for a long moment. “You are dismissed, soldier.” Jean stood and saluted with chilling professionalism before walking out of the room.

As soon as the door closed, Blake exploded. “He’s lying!” he shouted, slamming his fist on the table. “You didn’t see those bodies, sir. I did. There’s no way insurgents did that. The markings, the mutilations—Jean did it. I know he did.”

The Captain ran a hand over his face, his expression grim. “I know, Sergeant. I know. But without solid proof, we can’t do anything yet. Forensics is our best shot.”

Blake paced the room, still seething. "What if he runs? What if he tries to disappear before we can bring him in?"

The Captain sighed. "We'll keep him on base, under watch. But until we have evidence—hard evidence—we have to play this by the book."

Blake shook his head in frustration but he knew the Captain was right. As much as he wanted to put a bullet in Jean's head right

then and there, they needed proof. Until they had it, Jean would continue walking free.

The Captain put on his lid and walked to Medical trying to keep his mind off what had just happened.

In the couple of days that followed, the forensic team worked tirelessly to piece together what had really happened at the mosque. They cataloged the symbols carved into the villagers' bodies, cross-referencing them with ancient Sumerian texts. The

markings were unmistakable—this was no random act of violence. It was a ritual, one meant to summon something dark and malevolent.

The Court Martial convened soon after for murder, dereliction of duty and conduct unbecoming. The brutalized bodies, the Sumerian symbols, his boot prints, lack of signs of insurgents, all of it painted a damning picture. But even with this damning evidence, it wasn't enough. Jean

had covered his actions too well, leaving the investigation muddled.

During the Court Martial, Jean remained unwavering in his story. His emotionless demeanor and precise account of the "insurgent ambush" made him seem eerily composed. When the forensics team began analyzing the remains of the soldiers, they found some inconsistencies with Jean's story. The trajectory of the bullets and the wounds suggested a deliberate, methodical

execution rather than the chaos of a firefight. The forensic team had presented their findings—detailing the Sumerian symbols carved into the bodies and the deliberate method of mutilation—but even the boot prints being of the type that the whole company wore, Jean's defense dismissed it all as circumstantial evidence, painting him as a victim of a brutal attack.

Despite the damning forensic evidence and the gut-wrenching testimony of soldiers

who had witnessed the aftermath, Jean walked away, leaving a trail of unanswered questions and shattered lives. They simply could not prove Jean of any wrong doing. Nothing was concrete. Leaving nothing but abject suspicions and lingering opinions that Jean could not be trusted. No Soldier would ever be lead by Jean again.

The Military had to make a decision. Without a confession or a witness, Jean was dishonorably discharged, they wrote

“Something significant happened and you failed to give a reasonable account, maybe an outright lie but you are being separated from the military for a loss of trust. No formal charges have been upheld but your separation is under the auspices that your testimony is incomplete at best. If further evidence comes to light you may be formally charged in a civilian court.”

Sergeant Blake watched Jean walk away from the Court Martial, his face twisted in

disgust. He knew the truth but there was nothing he could do. Jean had gotten away with it, for now. But deep down, Blake knew that men like Jean didn't stop. Blake hoped, one day that justice would finally be served.

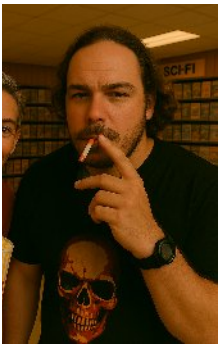
After the Court Martial, Jean's life unraveled. Jean left the military under a cloud of suspicion, his name tarnished but his freedom intact. Discharged from the military, without benefits, he found himself ostracized by society, haunted by the rumors

of what he had done in Iraq. The forensic findings were classified, buried deep within confidential military reports and the truth of what had happened at the mosque was never officially acknowledged. His family cut ties with him and he became a homeless drifter, roaming the streets.

The Sumerian tablet, still in his possession he knew it was worth a lot but didn't have any idea of where to sell it. So he wandered around scavenging for things he

knew he could sell, drowning himself in alcohol. As he wandered, he muttered to himself about blood, sacrifice and the demon that never came, his mind forever fractured by the horrors he had unleashed in a bombed-out mosque in Southern Iraq.

He wandered, muttering to himself about blood, sacrifice and the demon that never came. The world moved on but Jean remained—a mask, empty and unbroken, hiding nothing at all.



Toby Nixon is an author of horror, occult and speculative fiction, with a passion for exploring the darkest corners of the human mind. Raised in East Texas and Southwest Louisiana, Toby draws on a lifetime of strange places, stranger people and the wild, haunted landscapes of the American South. His work is known for its psychological depth, unflinching realism and willingness to stare into the abyss. If you enjoyed this story, discover more of his books:

ko-fi.com/darkwoodspresents

Amazon: amazon.com/author/tobynixon